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SUBJECT: SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY REPORT 04-05

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BEGIN TEXT:

The Government's poor human rights record worsened in 2004, as the Government continued to commit numerous abuses, and there was a significant rise in extrajudicial killings. Torture by security forces continued to occur on a regular basis. Police corruption continued to be a problem, and a climate of impunity was an obstacle to ending the abuses and killings. Prison conditions remained extremely harsh and life threatening and contributed to some deaths. Violence was a pervasive element in the country's politics. Fair and expeditious trials were problematic due to lengthy pretrial detention, corruption and a large judicial case backlog. Freedom of speech, movement, assembly, and political association was restricted. In June, the main opposition party, the Awami League, ended its boycott of Parliament, though it continues to allege that it is prevented from exercising parliamentary prerogatives. Child labor and abuse of child workers remained widespread and were serious problems. Trafficking in women and children for the purpose of prostitution and forced labor received renewed focus from the Government, which, beginning in the summer, moved aggressively and successfully to arrest, prosecute, and convict traffickers. Violence against women and discrimination against indigenous people and religious minorities persisted. Members of the Ahmadiyya sect remained under pressure in some areas from Islamist bigots, but by the end of 2004 there was significant improvement in Government efforts to protect the Ahmadiyyas.

The U.S. human rights and democracy strategy in Bangladesh aims to strengthen democratic institutions, transparency and accountability to citizens, and respect for the rule of law and human rights. To do this, the United States seeks to reform political parties, increase informed citizen political participation, strengthen local government, improve police and military professionalism, encourage better governance, reduce corruption, promote religious tolerance, reduce violence against women and address trafficking, as well as improve women, children and worker rights.

U.S. officials publicly highlight the need for improvements in human rights conditions by using the State Department's annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices as a key tool for moving the dialogue on human rights forward. The Country Report is widely publicized in Bangladesh and closely scrutinized by the Government, opposition, press and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) both in Bangladesh and abroad.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials work publicly and privately to engage the Government, the opposition and diverse elements of civil society on the importance of democratic institutions, including the parliament, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and have condemned violence in the form of strikes and personal assaults as an instrument of political coercion. In 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios, Under Secretary of Labor Roy Grizzard, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Affairs Christina Rocca, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Affairs Torkel Patterson, and Voice of America Director David Jackson all, during visits to Dhaka, raised the importance of human rights. The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission delivered seven major speeches that focused heavily on human rights, including keynote addresses on events marking Press Freedom Day and International Human Rights Day. Key themes included respect for due process, the exercise of peaceful, legitimate political rights, and tolerance and protection for religious minorities. To commemorate International Human Rights Day, editorials by the Secretary of State Powell and the Ambassador were widely placed in local media. Addressing a human rights fair, the Deputy Chief of Mission devoted special emphasis to combating the scourge of domestic violence.

Responding to the growing incidence of extra-judicial killings by paramilitary police units, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials publicly, and in meetings with senior Government ministers, expressed strong concerns over the appearance of Government-sanctioned executions as a crime-fighting instrument. Additionally, IMET, E-IMET, and counter-terrorism training courses sponsored by the USG for Bangladeshi law enforcement and security personnel emphasized

respect for human rights. Human rights were included in the curriculum in USG-funded peacekeeping courses and in joint training involving Bangladeshi peacekeepers, over 8,000 of whom are now abroad serving in 12 countries.

Because many of the human rights abuses centered on issues of governance and corruption, the Embassy focused its democracy promotion efforts on the sector of political reform and improving local governance. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is funding projects totaling \$12 million to strengthen parliamentary committees, reform political parties, and assist elected local governments to play a more active role in society. Over the past year, USAID has continued to support the formation of the Municipal Association of Bangladesh (MAB), which represents 231 of the 281 municipalities in the country, as well as the creation of the National Union Parishad Forum (NUPF), a network for the second level of local government (equivalent to locally elected councils). Assistance to the MAB included carrying out a membership campaign, organizing a national convention and establishing and collecting membership fees. A total of 43 policy workshops were held at the district level, along with two national policy workshops.

Despite the national level stalemate between the two major political parties, training for mid-level party leaders has made significant progress. USAID funds a program with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) to implement these training programs. In the past year, NDI conducted a series of training for mid-level political party leaders in six cities.

A total of 160 political leaders participated in these events, including 32 women. One of the major focuses of these trainings was on building internal democratic practices within the political parties. A regional conference, supported by IRI, on the roles and responsibilities of political parties was held for political party youth leadership. Nearly 4,000 young party members participated.

The United States also continues to support local human rights groups through a four-year, \$7.4 million program that provides critical services such as monitoring police stations and providing shelter to abused women through sub-grants, as well as training and technical assistance to human rights NGOs. Its initiatives to combat the endemic problem of corruption and train Bangladeshi journalists in investigative journalism continue to evolve. USAID also co-chairs a local donor working group on anti-corruption initiatives with the World Bank.

In the past year, the Embassy has sponsored 22 Bangladeshis on the International Visitor program to advance the goals of respect for rule of law, leadership development for women, student leaders and civic responsibility, freedom of the press, and the U.S. political process among other topics.

This past year, the Embassy also focused on the security and freedom of journalists, who face pressure and sometimes fatal violence from persons likened to criminals, political bosses, and Islamist extremists. The Ambassador made five high profile visits to major newspaper offices to underscore our support for freedom of the press. Embassy's press section placed in several newspapers an editorial by Ambassador Thomas on World Press Freedom Day.

Since the police have perpetrated many of the human rights abuses, the Embassy is focusing on enhancing their professional skills and their commitment to human rights and the rule of law. The Regional Security Office and Office of Defense Cooperation are also heavily involved in promoting human rights through the programs they sponsor to improve the professionalism of Bangladesh's security and military forces. Anti-Terrorist Assistance, International Military Education and Training, and Counter-Terrorism money has been used for this purpose. A Department of Justice Investigative Training Assistance Program began this year to improve police professionalism through an integrated training curriculum at the police academy and detective training school.

The Islamic Foundation, a Government of Bangladesh agency, provides religious training to approximately 45,000 imams nationwide. USAID provided orientation to 200 imams from the Islamic Foundation about U.S. programs in human rights women's rights, health care, HIV/AIDS, agriculture, economic growth, democracy and governance. These imams also visited several U.S.-sponsored project sites in an effort to promote dialogue and work with the Government of Bangladesh to show them an aspect of U.S. foreign policy not typically featured in the local media.

When the Bangladesh Government began in January a process to ban the publications of the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam, the Ambassador met with high-level host country officials to convey our deep concerns and to stress the importance of religious freedom. By the end of 2004, efforts to give legal authority to the unofficial ban had stalled, the

Government had effectively stopped bigots from attacking the Ahmadiyya headquarters in central Dhaka, and, Ahmadiyya community leaders reported, local police had become more responsive to their requests for protection.

Improving conditions for Bangladeshi workers has been a consistent aspect of the U.S. overall human rights strategy. Working with the Government, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), the International Labor Organization, and local labor and industry groups, the United States has had many achievements, including the virtual elimination of child labor from the export-oriented ready-made garment industry through a \$1.5 million project. The U.S. Labor Department and USAID also fund programs to eliminate the worst forms of child labor, to support working women,s education centers, empower rural women in the informal sector and provide opportunities for persons with disabilities. The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor activities include a \$6 million project to eliminate the worst forms of child labor in five targeted industries ) beedi production (the hand-rolled cigarette industry), match-making, tanneries, construction and child domestic workers. As of December 2004, 22,900 children had been removed from hazardous work, and more than 30,000 children have been placed in either non-formal or formal education or pre-vocational training. In 2004, Parliament passed legislation authorizing full freedom of association in the export processing zones; the embassy is closely monitoring implementation of the legislation, including provisions for worker representation elections. . Supported by USAID, the ACILS Solidarity Center, and the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers, Union Federation (BIGUF) played an instrumental role in the drafting of this legislation. Work has begun to assist workers in EPZ factories to better organize themselves and to understand their new rights and responsibilities under this legislation.

Following the designation in 2004 of Bangladesh as a Tier III country in terms of its commitment to combat trafficking in persons, the Embassy and USAID worked closely with the Government to devise and implement an anti-trafficking action plan. Within the 90-day window, Bangladesh was able to demonstrate sufficient progress to justify a reassessment of its designation to Tier II (watch list). An aggressive public diplomacy campaign, backed up by continuous engagement with Bangladeshi Government officials, highlighted the importance of trafficking as a U.S. concern and eventually a significant success reflecting effective bilateral partnership

USAID, which leads a thematic working group on anti-trafficking with the Government, civil society and other donor representatives, also worked closely with the Minister of Women and Children,s Affairs to carry out road marches to raise awareness about trafficking. TV channels aired USAID sponsored anti-trafficking spots and messages free of charge. The successful imam outreach program, under which imams in the border areas received training in anti-trafficking, will be expanded to other critical areas of the country. Over the past year, ten major village gatherings totaling 4000 persons were organized by imams to raise awareness about trafficking. Many imams now address this issue periodically after Friday prayers and at other community events. Several thousand people attended two anti-trafficking film festivals that the Public Affairs section of the Embassy coordinated in outlying regions of the country. The Public Affairs section also works with local NGO and other cultural groups on their efforts to educate rural Bangladeshis about the dangers of TIP in the form of specialized folk songs.

END TEXT  
THOMAS